DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 433 380 UD 032 986

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TITLE Why Hispanic Children Fail in School: Knowing the Facts Is Changing Their Future.
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Bilingual Education; *Cultural Awareness; Cultural Differences; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Teachers; *Hispanic Americans; *Low Achievement; *Multicultural Education; *Parent Participation; Teacher Attitudes; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS *Hispanic American Students; New York City Board of Education

ABSTRACT

Knowing the facts about Hispanic students in the U.S. school system may help educators open their eyes to the fact that most Hispanic students are failing in schools. Teachers in one elementary school in the Bronx (New York City) were surveyed about their professional relationships and thoughts about the school and the parents and children they serve. Teachers were also asked how they incorporated their students' culture into class activities or lessons. Results are compared with current research on teacher attitudes. Just over half (53%) of these teachers taught a monolingual class, and 47% taught a bilingual class. Many teachers said that they made connections with their students' home culture through literature, and others said that they made connections in Social Studies classes. Teachers did not think that parents were very involved in their children's education, perhaps because they did not know how to help their children with school work. Most of the teachers (89%) thought that the school contributed to students' difficulties. Among the suggestions for improving the education of Hispanic students is increasing parent participation in their children's school work and school activities. (SLD)

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ED 433 380

Why Hispanic Children Fail in School Knowing the Facts is Changing their Future

Abstract

Knowing the facts about Hispanic students in America's school system can perhaps help educator open their eyes to the fact that most Hispanic students are failing in school. While waiting for the education system to make their transformation there are many things that can be done by educators and schools in order to help Hispanic students and their family to feel and become successful. A group of teachers in a NYC, Bronx bilingual elementary school were surveyed on their relationships and thoughts about the school, parents, and children they service. Teachers were also asked about how they incorporate their students' culture to class activities or lesson. The results are compared with current research to the teacher's opinions; moreover, there are suggestions that are geared to positively change the future of America's Hispanic population.

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Why Hispanic Children Fail in School
Knowing the Facts is Changing their Future

Hispanic population

The Hispanic population is not a uniform population but is made up of many individual groups with different identities, cultures, customs, and a rich history which they brought with them to America's already diverse society. Hispanics have become part of our nation and are continuing to enter the education system. Many Hispanic enter American society because they seek a better life or are escaping political turmoil. For what ever the reason they are migrating to America. One fact is clear, the Hispanic population is increasing and will continue to increase way into the next century and Hispanic children will be entering American school systems all over the country.

Hispanic groups have migrated to the United States from all parts of the world. They range from first to third and fourth generation. They consist mostly of Mexican, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Dominicans, Colombian, Ecuadorian, Salvadorian, Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, Honduran, and people from Peru. Despite the fact that many children and their parent are American citizen or have been here for one or two generation, the education system has been failing their Hispanic-American students or Hispanic population. Dropout rates are increasingly high. According to (Bonilla, 1997, p.4) one third of Hispanic youths dropout of high school; even though recent migration contributes to high dropout rates, it is still

high for first and second year Hispanic generation. Bonilla also states that health, teen pregnancy or high birthrates, and poverty contribute to Hispanic youths dropout rate. There are also demographic, economic, and population differences among the Hispanic population which will not make the job of educating Hispanic youths any easier. In the education system Hispanic children face cultural obstacles.

Moving in the right direction

Educators need to become aware or acknowledge the diversity within the population they teach in order to become a more effective teacher. Educators working with Hispanic children need to find new approaches not only to educate but help the Hispanic population succeed. Knowing the population being taught will make educators more sensitive to the student's needs. Knowing where Hispanic children come from will perhaps help them find their way in American society which they have become a major part of and will someday contribute to. Their education success is vital to the future of this country (Trueba & Bartolome, 1997, p.2). Their success will impact on future generations to achieve high academic standards.

It is important to first realize that besides the language many Hispanic groups have different customs and beliefs. They also come from different socioeconomic situations. Educators can use this diversity to their advantage while

broadening their own knowledge. According to (Trueba, & Bartolome, 1997, p.5), by incorporating and capitalizing on student's language, belief, and culture teachers can provide enrichment while still meeting their responsibility with particular academic content knowledge and learning skills. New strategies or approaches have to be initiated and implemented. Students and their parents need to become aware that they too have come to this country to make a better life and that education is the foundation for that success. An education will open many doors for them and provide them many opportunities. With subtlety educators can encourage Hispanic minority students to shed their feelings of inferiority in order to build their self-esteem which in turn will help them meet new challenges and aid in their success. Educators have to first eliminate their own bias, stereotypes, and negative perceptions. Educators need to be sensitive to their students' needs and make them feel welcome in an insensitive education system. They need to raise their own expectation towards Hispanic students and address their cultural needs, as well as respecting their differences.

Knowledge is understanding

One thing is clear the Hispanic population is increasing faster than non-Hispanic whites. It is predicted that by 2011 the Hispanic population will be a majority-minority or the largest minority group in the United States, (Gonzalez, 1992, p.4). The Hispanic population is increasing but not thriving, they have been

culturally and linguistically deprived by our education system. They are undereducated in mathematics, reading, and writing. SAT scores still remain 40 points lower than the national average. (Ramirez, 1993, p.5) states that poverty rates is related to parents educational level. The less educational years a parent has the less their annual income; thus, the lower the income the less likely Hispanic children are to be enrolled in nursery school and fewer opportunity are afforded to the families. Unfortunately the trend continues. Hispanics have a high dropout rate or tend to be a grade of two low for their age when they reach high school. On average Hispanics are less likely to attend college and if they do, they are more likely to enroll as a part-time student rather than a full-time student. If they seek a higher education they tend to enroll in remedial classes. If they attend a two community college they are likely never to go into a four year college therefore not getting a BA; moreover, only about one-third complete four or more years (Petrovich, 1993, p 4). Higher education relates to higher wages, higher wages relates to living above the poverty rate and providing the next generation with affordable child care and a valuable belief in education.

Hispanics are worse off today than in previous decades. They have been describe as mentally retarded or learning disabled (Trueba & Bartalome, 1997, p.2). With such assumption there is no wonder that Hispanic Youth have such low self-esteem, poor motivation, and lag behind the academic national averages.

According to (Fillmore, 1990, p.30) Hispanic students begin experience academic problems and academic distress by the third grade, compounded by the fact that the Hispanic population is statistically younger than non-Hispanic whites. The Hispanic youths do not do well in the American Educational System because of cultural and language factors, they tend to do better through cooperative activities and involvement with others which is known as a field dependent learning style. In contrary to most public schools which insist that students listen quietly, sit straight, and prove what they know by taking objective or standardize test (Gonzalez, 1992, p.6). Hispanic students do not do well on standardized test.

Moving towards the future

Now that the problem and causes of Hispanic education in the United States are stated, the next part is the solution. First and for most is that all finger pointing should cease, it won't solve anything. Parents blame teachers and the teachers blame the parents for the children's academic failure yet the ones who are losing out are the children, they are the true victims. Through joint efforts parents and teacher need to work together. Educators need to be sensitive to their students learning styles and understand their language and culture because it is a crucial part of their identity. Because of the language barriers and cultural differences teachers should take at least one course in multicultural education (Gonzalez, 1992, p.12). It is important that parents become involved and aware in

their child's education and informed about the activities that are going on in the classroom or school. Teachers have to also be aware that the Hispanic population does not fall into one group but several distinct groups or culture of Spanish speaking people (Bonilla, 1997, p.10).

The curriculum should be designed to relate to today's children. Teachers should capitalize on Hispanic experiences and strengths or existing knowledge and make use of it whenever possible. The acknowledgment of students' home, language, culture, and values are crucial elements for Hispanic academic success. Heterogeneous learning groups can provide each child to show off their strengths. Teachers can provide students with more language experience in the writing process and whole language activities. Educators also have the power to eliminate apprehension and hostility in the educational experience of the students while helping them learn to appreciate each other experiences, custom, beliefs, and language (Trueba, & Bartolome, 1997, p.5).

The school's part

Schools should take seriously Hispanic cultures and not just celebrate multiculturalism in abstract. Their should be collaboration between community and school or a relationship between school and community. Teachers and the administration need realize that they are the bridges connecting the world of home to the classroom (Fillimore, 1990, p.33). Fillimore also suggest that teachers need

to help children develop their thinking skills and their understanding of the world around them to help the children interpret and understand their experience in a language that enables them to share these experience with their peers and parents. Schools should draw family life into the education of the child rather than dismiss or disregard it as irrelevant. Children and their parents want and deserve the best education that can be provided. Linking home or the real world with the school is in the best interest of Hispanic students.

What are teachers doing?

I surveyed teachers from a South Bronx, NYC bilingual elementary school where the population of the Hispanic students is about 90%. Of the teachers who responded to the survey 53% teach a monolingual class and 47% teach a bilingual class. 71% teach a regular education class and 29% teach a special education class. Of those teachers surveyed, 6% teach kindergarten, 11% teach first grade, 11% teach second grade, 18% teach third grade, 18% teach fourth grade, 18% teach fifth grade, and 18% teach sixth grade.

Since one of the criteria of improving academic success for Hispanic students is immersing their culture into classroom lessons and relating subject areas to what is familiar to the student, the teachers were asked "how well do they speak or understand Spanish?" 59% of the teachers responded that they understood the language very well, 24% know the language well but dominate English, 11%

barely understand the language, and 6% do not understand the language at all. Almost three quarters of the teachers can relate to their students in their native tongue.

As for teachers surveyed, 47% deal with at least 3 different Hispanic cultural groups within their class, 47% have anywhere from 4 to 6 Hispanic cultural groups that are represented in their class, and 6% have anywhere from 7 to 9 groups represented in their class. When the teachers were asked how well they know their students cultures, 18% responded that they knew the cultures very well, 71% knew their students' cultures well, and 11% barely knew their students culture. Most of the teachers know their student cultures well enough to relate their class activities to their students identity but only 41% often include the students culture into their lessons, 41% include it occasionally, 11% barely include their students culture, and 6% never do.

When the teachers were ask to explain how they include the students' culture into their lessons, many stated that the connection are made through literature. Other said they compare differences and similarities of culture with American culture through Social Studies. Through Social Studies a teacher stated that "letting the students know about the contribution that their culture has made to American society can help build up their students' self esteem". Teachers also said that trips, book clubs, games, and music are geared towards the students'

culture. Other teachers stated that they relate their students' culture superficially through calendar events or holidays, assembly programs, and multicultural activities because administrative demands and the district's curriculum, it makes it difficult to get into the cultures of the population being taught. One particular teacher stated that "through the use of monthly thematic units it is possible to introduce a culture's music, flag, geographic location, food, clothes, and climate". With this information the teacher relates it to other subject areas such as math by using the data and making all sorts of charts, tables, and graphs. Another teacher provides students with opportunities for language experience by having the students share their experiences and opinions; moreover, by having them bring and describe artifacts brought from home. With some extra planning and creativity it is possible to capture the students' interests and still provide them with enriching opportunities in all subject areas. If the students can relate to what they are learning then they will learn.

How are parents involved?

According to current research another criteria that will gear Hispanic students towards academic success is the level of involvement parents invest in their children's education. When teachers were asked how involved parents are in their children's education the response was startling. Teachers stated that none of their students' parents are seriously involved in their child's education, this is not

to say that they don't care but they might not know how to help their child. Another 65% of the teachers stated that the parents somewhat involved but not enough. 24% said that the parents are hardly involved and 11% said that parents are not involved in their child's education at all. Although most parents are receptive to telephone calls and letters, attend parent teacher, and express their concern about their child's behavior and progress, the main issue is that they do not assist their child with his/her academic work. According to several of the teacher surveyed they stated that their is not enough family support. Parents either do not know how to help their children or do not even bother to help their child with homework and various kind of home project. Despite the lack of the parents involvement, 65% of the teachers often make contact with the parents, 29% make contact occasionally, and 6% rarely make contact with the parents.

When teachers were asked if they think that most Hispanic students are failing in school, 59% said yes and 41% said no. Although, more than half of the teacher surveyed believe that Hispanic students are failing in school, 47% of them still have high expectation towards their students academic success. The other 53% have moderate expectations but none of the teachers had low or no expectations for the students they serve. All the teachers surveyed want their student to succeed and expect them to do the best they can. Several comments

were made by some of the teachers regarding expectations. The following statement made should always be kept in mind by all teachers.

- *"Although we have to be realistic because of the children's environment and socioeconomic status but when a teacher's attitude is positive then a lot of good things can be done."*
- *"all students can succeed but it takes time, lowering expectations cannot help, it can only make things worse because if demands are less then learning is less."*
- *"Some children do their best and some don't even try but that doesn't stop me from pushing because success takes time."*
- *"Every child can do well unless their is something interfering with their abilities but all children can succeed at their own pace because each child can produce what they are capable of."*
- *"Although many student seem to have attention problems, I like to challenge and motivate them but most of all I like to make them feel good about themselves.*

Teachers have high expectation for their students and many try to do everything in their power to help their students succeed but it is an on going battle, one that has many obstacles.

Other obstacles

Teachers were asked if they were aware of any problems that cause there Hispanic students academic difficulties, 77% of the teachers said "yes" and 23% said "no". They were also asked if these academic difficulties were different for different cultural groups, 35% said "yes" and 65% said "no". Of the 35% of teachers who said "yes" stated that success in American school system depends on what age the child entered school and acquired a second language. Others stated that some children are shipped back and forth from their country to this country contributes to the child's academic instability. Other obstacles are that some students come from dysfunctional homes or English is not being reinforced in the homes because the parents are Spanish dominant. In comparison to white students many Hispanic students also have to deal with poverty, unsafe living conditions, and language barriers. These are just a few obstacles teachers have to deal with when working with Hispanic students.

School's contribution

Finally, teachers were asked if the school or district contributes in any way to problems in the education of Hispanic students, 89% said "yes" and 11% said "no". When asked to explain many teachers stated in one way or another that the administration with it good intention can become quite overwhelming. It seems that teachers need more time in a day to cover what is expected, not only with

their academic responsibility but administrative duties, too. The district is also a contributing factor to the failure of Hispanic students, they are an institution that does not reflect the needs of the population it services. Many problems are also greater than the school itself is capable of handling. The school is doing the best it can with its budget. It provides students with ESL program, math lab, counseling, and resource room services but it takes too much quality time away from the primary teacher. Students get pulled out of the classroom constantly for one program or another.

Conclusion

If Hispanic children are to succeed there has to be a much better relationship and understanding between the adults who spend a significant time with that child. Children need all the support they can get, they need to feel that the parents, teachers, and administration are making a joint effort to insure their success. It seems that the education system is pulling in one direction, the parents are not cooperating the way they should, and teachers who want their students to succeed are stuck right in the middle of their administrative duties and doing what's best for their students. So much can be done but if we stand separate the task will be difficult and little will be accomplish.

One of the major issues that continually came up in the survey is the lack parental involvement. Parents who if stand together can have a powerful voice,

can be the best advocate for their child but don't or may not know how use their rights as a parent. Many who truly want their children to succeed may not know how to go about helping their children. Other parents who don't speak English perhaps not dare to speak up or admit to their ignorance. Parents need to be informed of their right, not just through literature but through meetings and workshops. There are also dysfunctional families who are not aware of services to assist them. There is a need for more parent workshops, ESL courses for adults in the community, and outreach programs for family in crisis. Teacher-parent relationship also need to improve. Not only the twice a year parent-teacher conferences or the occasional letter or phone call home but perhaps monthly meetings between teacher and parents to let them know what their children are learning and activities that are being done in the class as well as suggestions of what can be done outside of school, such as suggested trip and book purchases. One thing is clear, if the parents demonstrate to their child or children that they value a good education and become more involved with their children's school activities, a message can be sent not only to the children but hopefully to future generations by building a strong foundation.

As for the NYC public school system we will have to see where its going. At this moment the system is in an upheaval. The city has realized it has a crisis on its hands. There are new standards, approaches, strategies, and standardized

tests being implemented. Research states that Hispanic students don't do well on standardized test, so only time will tell. Perhaps if teaching strategies change and adapted to the students learning style then we might see a positive change for the future of our Hispanic population.

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